

Article

“You Can Make a Difference”: Teachers’ Agency in Addressing Social Differences in the Student Body

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Abstract

Teachers are key players in transforming the education system (van der Heijden et al., 2015). They shape educational processes, influence school policies, and make day-to-day decisions that have a direct effect on students (Vähäsantanen, 2015). Yet we currently know very little about whether they can contribute to the creation of social equality of opportunity. This article focuses by way of example on the experiences and interpretative schemes of teachers in Germany, as the country is known for its highly selective school system. It draws on data from an exploratory study based on 20 narrative interviews (Rosenthal, 2018) with schoolteachers at three comprehensive schools in East and West Germany, which were selected because comprehensive schools in Germany see themselves as a more equal-opportunity form of education. The article begins by identifying four types of teacher action orientations in addressing the social differences of schoolchildren. Unexpectedly, only a few teachers exhibited a socially conscious inclination to act—for example, by providing targeted support to schoolchildren from socially disadvantaged households. In the second step, by comparing teacher biographies, school environments, and historical imprints, the article attempts to identify certain conditions under which teachers perceive themselves as responsible for addressing social differences among students. Beyond illustrating the interplay of biographical experiences and school culture, the study’s east–west contextualization opens up a new perspective for examining the lingering implications of the German half-day schooling model even after the introduction of all-day schooling in 2003. One possible conclusion is that the transformation of the German school system from a half-day to an all-day model has not taken the tasks of teachers into account, which, as this article points out, would be important in making them aware of schoolchildren’s different social backgrounds and their effects on achievement.

Keywords

comprehensive schools; educational inequalities; Germany; teachers; school policies; social support

Issue

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1. Introduction

The German education system is highly selective. In general, after the fourth school year, schoolchildren are sorted into a three-tier school system on the basis of performance, with each tier leading to different qualifications. It is a selective process in which the student’s social background is the central predictor of educational success or failure (Becker, 2003; Pietsch & Stubbe, 2007). These outcomes are explained by the interplay of two factors: first, the early tracking (after

the fourth school year) that is typical in Germany and the accompanying parental decision about transitioning to secondary school (Boudon, 1974); and second, the non-neutral expectations of the schools themselves, which tend to favor middle-class behaviors (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1998). The role of teachers in the reproduction and transformation of educational inequalities within this system has been widely acknowledged but is currently not fully understood (Fullan, 1993; Li & Ruppard, 2021). This article focuses on teachers as important players in addressing and tempering the impact of social

inequality on education associated with students' different social backgrounds.

After an overview of the current state of research, I present the design of this study, which explores teachers' experiences and interpretative schemes through interviews. In line with the premises of Blumer's concept of symbolic interaction (Blumer, 1969), I understand teachers as powerful actors. I identify four types of action orientations presented by teachers. I then briefly introduce these orientations and discuss how they can contribute to reproducing or transforming social inequality. It is on this basis that I pose this highly relevant question: Under which conditions do teachers provide targeted support to schoolchildren from socially disadvantaged households? My findings suggest that the few socially sensitive teachers draw on their own biographical experiences and organizational goals to justify their actions in addressing equal opportunities. It becomes clear that strategies of action aimed at equalizing opportunities require special conditions that are rare in Germany.

2. Teachers' Role in the Reproduction of Social Inequalities

The role of teachers in the reproduction of educational inequality has been observed repeatedly (Li & Ruppap, 2021). The decisive factor is their perception of the pupils' social class, which they negotiate in relation to the expectations of the school and how the students adapt in response to those expectations (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1998). In Germany, all teachers are legally bound to provide equal opportunities (Article 3 of the German Basic Law) and support services in cases of underachievement, but this does not always happen. Bourdieu-inspired habitus research explains this as an entrenchment of teacher thinking in *middle-class ideals* that are central to the reproduction of social inequality (Lange-Vester, 2012, 2015; Schumacher, 2002). As research shows, this is the case for all teachers, whether they are upwardly mobile or status preservers (Kampa et al., 2011; Kühne, 2006). Most of them have proven themselves in school and are convinced of both the functionality and fairness of performance-based selection in the education system (Becker & Birkelbach, 2011; Lange-Vester, 2015). In keeping with the findings of Cicourel and Kitsuse (1963), teachers' actions can be explained by their membership in the school organization. Especially at the intersection of status transitions, where teachers act as *gatekeepers*, it becomes apparent that they become actors of institutional discrimination in a selective education system (Gomolla & Radtke, 2009). As part of this gatekeeping, they relate their expectations to the supposed requirements of the secondary education system, such as the need for a supportive network (Hollstein, 2008). Here, too, it becomes apparent that teachers disadvantage the disadvantaged and favor the advantaged, a phenomenon known as the Matthew effect (Merton, 1968). Research

on the teaching profession points to the influence of *biographical socialization* (Fabel-Lamla, 2004; Lortie, 2007) and discusses the need for biographical reflection. Ethnographically inspired educational research also points to the importance of the *classroom setting*, in which teachers are continuously required to categorize or rank students under temporal and situational pressures (Kalthoff, 1996; Zaborowski, 2011). The process of selection or sorting schoolchildren from one type of school to another overrides the pedagogical process that aims to educate and socialize children (Ballantine et al., 2017; Streckeisen et al., 2007).

Information on how teachers can be enabled to create social equality in opportunities is rare even though it is a mammoth task that faces all European countries in equal measure. Out of five interpretive schemes among teachers, a study by Streckeisen et al. (2007) identified one type that prefers to support pupils rather than to single them out. These are social-democratically politicized and pedagogically child-centered teachers who work in inclusive comprehensive schools (referred to as *Gesamtschule* in Germany; Lange-Vester et al., 2019; Streckeisen et al., 2007). The state of research indicates that teachers are not to be understood as free-floating actors, as is often the case in interview studies. Their actions must always be considered in the context of their embedding in the school organization and social environment. Widening this perspective through reviewing the international literature points to a connection between educational politics, social orders, and teachers' activities. Teachers in the Finnish or Canadian school systems see themselves as having a stronger responsibility to support disadvantaged students than those in the German system (Artiles, 2011; Vähäsantanen, 2015). The Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) study from 2003 stated that students in Germany felt less supported than in 22 other OECD countries (Geißler & Weber-Menges, 2010).

However, the conditions under which teachers perceive themselves as able to address social differences among students—and educationally disadvantaged students in particular—and as responsible for doing so still need to be understood further.

3. Design and Methods

This study is exploratory and specifically looks at teachers who can be expected to develop an orientation for creating social equality. To clarify this predilection, I draw on Blumer's understanding of actors in symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969), which maintains that actors subjectively interpret their social realities and act on the basis of these interactively negotiated and situationally generated interpretations. According to this concept, people act out and reproduce social reality on a daily basis according to their interactively generated interpretations of this reality ("interpretative schemes"), but they can also reject or transform it (Schwalbe, 2008).

If teachers therefore understand social inequality as a challenge to pedagogical action, then they also develop corresponding strategies for action. These (inter)actions do not emerge in an entirely new or free space but are rather “interlinked.”

Having an interest in meaning-making and interpretative schemes means being sensitive to the interactions that one has with others and society at large. Cultural or socio-historical contrast is a good way to include this perspective. As a consequence, my empirical study also explores a socio-historical contrast by means of an east–west comparison in Germany. The focus here is on the type of school that has made the creation of equal opportunities a central part of its agenda in Germany since the 1970s: the comprehensive school (Tillmann, 1988).

I will now explain the decisions behind this study design, after which I will present the basic data that underpin this study.

3.1. Socio-Historical Contrast

It is well known that divergences in teachers’ orientations and interpretative schemes are consistent with the education system as well as socio-cultural influences (Derouet, 1992). Even within Germany, there are regional differences that stem from the federal structure of education, as the country’s education policy falls under the jurisdiction of its federal states. Even today these can be traced back to two socio-historically and politically divergent systems, those of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG). That lends itself to a natural comparison: Alongside the socialist school system (*Einheitsschule*), which made proportional equality of opportunity an ideological goal, there was a selective, tiered school system, still dominant today, that was based on the meritocratic principle (Geißler, 1993; Solga, 1995; von Below et al., 2013). This might explain why Zaborowski (2011) and Hollstein (2008) found evidence of divergent educational concepts and perceptions of inequality in East and West Germany. Research on justice also shows that equality is still negotiated as a central principle of justice in East Germany, whereas in West Germany the meritocratic idea of performance is predominant (Noll & Christoph, 2004).

In this study, I focus on federal states with comparable educational policies (von Below et al., 2013): Brandenburg (of the former GDR) and Lower Saxony (of the former FRG). It is worth noting here that teachers in Brandenburg underwent a radical system-transformation process after the unification of Germany in 1989–1990. This transformation led the teachers to experience multiple uncertainties; they were retrained, whereas everything remained the same for their colleagues in Lower Saxony. The question this raises is whether there is a persistent east–west divide between teachers’ understandings of their responsibilities, especially with regard to social inequalities.

3.2. Comprehensive School

For my sample, I engaged in organizational case studies (e.g., expert interviews with school heads, analysis of reports, and observations in everyday school life) with three comprehensive schools.

The comprehensive school, which starts after the fourth school year and is designed to lead its pupils to all possible qualifications, is quite common internationally (e.g., Denmark, France, Finland, UK) but remains an uncommon school option in Germany. Only 10 percent of all students in Germany attend this type of school. Although comprehensive schools could be observed to have a noticeably positive effect on the creation of equal opportunities during the 1970s (Fend, 1976), more recent statistics have indicated that the heterogenization of the school system has diluted this previously striking effect (Maaz et al., 2013). Comprehensive schools have since moved away from the original idea oriented along the lines of the Finnish school system; they now award numerical grades, offer courses differentiated by performance, and provide “open” voluntary afternoon care—as opposed to “bound” all-day care—that is organized by external professionals.

The three selected institutions have the following typical differences: Schools A and B in Brandenburg followed the GDR polytechnic school model up to 1991. Whereas School A has not implemented newer pedagogical concepts and discourses, the school head in School B initiated a course of participative reform, which introduced a closer parental involvement and instituted a “bound” all-day concept. Since the end of the 1990s, the lack of profile-building at School A has caused an unintentional “brain-drain” effect. It has had trouble attracting and retaining high-achieving students. At the same time, School B has acquired a good reputation for itself. In contrast, School C in Lower Saxony, which has been a comprehensive school since the early 1970s, is typical of the rare West German reform-pedagogical counterculture. It has earned an image as a “special” (Levin, 2008) and yet popular school that features obligatory all-day schooling, no differentiation of schooling along performance lines, and no numerical grading until the end of the eighth school year. The culture of School C aims to reduce social differences, whereas schools A and B do not follow a similarly clear concept. Schools such as these likewise provide different frameworks for the everyday activities of teachers. But do these frameworks have any impact at all on teachers’ day-to-day activities?

3.3. Interview Collection and Analysis

At the heart of this study are 20 interviews with teachers who were over 50 years of age at the time the interviews were conducted and thus socialized in the different political systems of the GDR and the FRG. With this empirically informed contrast, this interpretative study embeds the teachers’ subjective views in the specifics of both an

organizational and a socio-historical context in order to take seriously the challenge of the interplay of qualitative educational research (see, e.g., Mehan, 1992).

In the interviews, stimuli were specifically used to produce narratives about their biographies and the situations they experienced in everyday school life (Rosenthal, 2018). The focus was on telling stories with the narrative constraints of detailing, condensation, and story closure (Schütze, 2014), which is a helpful interview strategy to overcome the very common patterns of justification and argumentation. Asking, for example, to tell the story of the situation with a boy sitting under the table produces a different kind of data than asking that teacher to justify how he or she handled the same action.

The interviewed teachers were recruited through project presentations in three schools between 2011 and 2013. All but two of the teachers in the sample are female. This is not particularly surprising given that nearly 70 percent of German teachers are female. Nine teachers in the sample are upwardly mobile, which is uncommon because teachers in Germany are mainly from academic backgrounds (Cramer, 2010), although this state of research is often disputed owing to poor data on the subject (Kampa et al., 2011; Lange-Vester, 2012, 2015; Lange-Vester et al., 2019). The teachers in the sample represent all disciplines and variously teach from the fifth to the 13th school year.

The fully transcribed material was analyzed in three steps. First, the text types were differentiated in order to distinguish between narration, argumentation, and description (Schütze, 2014). The aim here was to assume a homology of narratives and experiences (Rosenthal, 2018) that would be fruitful for the analysis of action orientations. The narrations were then analyzed with sequence-analytical methods and merged into case descriptions, with a particular interest in reconstructing latent interpretative schemes and action orientations. Following this, I proceeded by systematically comparing the data within each interview and across the interviews. This ultimately led to my identification of the four action orientations detailed below. The next step was guided by a coding paradigm (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) that I adapted into two variants—one for teachers' transformative role and another for their reproductive role (see, e.g., Behrmann, in press).

This article therefore presents four action orientations of teachers and examines the conditions under which the idea of a more equal comprehensive school affects their actions.

4. Teachers' Action Orientations and the Reproduction of Social Inequality

My empirical material makes clear that nearly all teachers consider the reproduction of educational inequalities to be a challenge in the current school system. But only a few teachers exhibit a socially conscious inclination to counter-act this tendency.

4.1. Teachers' Action Orientations

The four identified action orientations differ in terms of how the parents are involved as well as in the attribution of responsibility for educational success and failure (see Table 1). I will briefly present each of these and then discuss the extent to which they aim to create equal opportunities in daily school life.

4.1.1. Pupils as Individualized Achievers (I)

A teacher who has been at School B in Brandenburg for 26 years outlines her educational goal as follows:

Yes, what I have always tried to pass on to my pupils is the fact that they have to work hard, you have to work hard, even if you don't always feel like it... and it is also up to every child nowadays....Every child has the possibility to also achieve such a [successful] path. (Teacher D, School B; all quotes from the interviews have been translated by the author)

This teacher later expands on the biographical experience of her own educational ascent. She believes in the meritocratic promise of achievement without taking into account the different starting positions afforded by different social backgrounds. From this teacher's point of view, pupils themselves are responsible for their own successes and failures. Teachers with this orientation also have no interest in gaining detailed knowledge of the pupils' living environments. Becoming close to the pupils runs counter to their professional self-image and the meritocratic ideal: Family life should not have any effect on school life. Thus, in this strategy of action, the teachers treat all achievements equally, regardless of the pupils' social background.

4.1.2. The Engagement of Third Parties (II)

If a student is not able to keep up in class, teachers with this orientation contact the parents and ask them to support their child's learning at home: "And I can specifically ask for parents, but sometimes, especially in German [class], I want the parents to help me a bit" (Teacher G, School B). This teacher describes giving a father tasks that include reading aloud and practicing grammar. In this way, the teachers assume that parents are, in theory, capable of supporting them, an assumption that is not always tenable in the face of contemporary structural changes in families. The responsibility for educational success thus lies with the parents at home. These teachers perpetuate the idea that underpins the German half-day school model (Gottschall & Hagemann, 2002), which imagines a division of tasks between an edifying and supportive parental home and a school that focuses on the teaching of content. This takes neither dual working parents nor educationally disadvantaged families into consideration:

Table 1. Teachers' orientation in addressing social differences.

	Pupils as individualized achievers (I)	Engagement of third parties (II)	"Pupils in context" as a pedagogical task (III)	Socially informed supportive action (IV)
Parental involvement	Nearly no contact	As learning support (selective)	Starting point for pedagogical work	Work alliances
Attribution of responsibility for educational success/failure	Schoolchildren	Parents and schoolchildren	Pedagogical concept	Teachers' actions

In the educational institutions of our children—from nursery, kindergarten, primary school, secondary school—We have always been involved and it was not only about our children, but it was about how to support the school, how to support the teachers, how to help the children. (Teacher D, School B)

This expectation of a supportive parental home is based on the middle-class-specific ideals that pervade the teachers' lives. Only a few parents are able to offer this support at all.

4.1.3. "Pupils in Context" as a Pedagogical Task (III)

This third action orientation does not presuppose parental cooperation but rather makes the involvement of pupils and parents the responsibility of the teachers. These teachers aim to establish a working alliance:

If you take education seriously, you can't have several ways of education running in parallel; you can't say, "Okay, this is what the parents do, and this is what the school does." If something doesn't work out, it's always the other person's fault. (Teacher B, School C)

This makes the pupils' starting conditions and their family environments something to be observed and taken into consideration. Teachers who adopt this orientation seek to find out what the possibilities for learning are in the home, what the German-language competencies are in the family, and how parents and children interact. It is about more than just grasping the socio-structural categorizations (e.g., occupation) of the parents; these teachers seek to gain an insight into everyday life (e.g., joint school trips), lifestyles, and educational milieus (e.g., Grundmann et al., 2011). To do this, these teachers build up a close relationship with the pupils and the parents. Visits to the parents' homes and simple telephone calls are possible methods of establishing proximity and shaping a trusting relationship, the basic building block of a necessary working alliance. Neither parental cooperation nor learning success as an individual achievement is assumed by these teachers. Educational success requires a collaborative effort that is equally linked to the social curiosity of the teacher and their pedagogical activities.

4.1.4. Socially Informed Supportive Action (IV)

Teachers with this action orientation tie a broader personal mandate for action—a mission, so to speak—to the students' perceptions of their socially divergent contexts: "I feel a great need for action and then I act; that is, I invest a lot of time and energy and, yes, love....I give them my attention" (Teacher L, School C). As these teachers themselves acknowledge, they go one step further and make an understanding of the social conditions of the pupils not only the starting point for their pedagogical work but also for their personal supportive action. They are teachers who offer additional learning aids, who provide pupils with learning materials in their mother tongue, or who deal with emotional hurdles through forms of reinforcement. The motto: "I won't change the world, but I may be important for one [pupil]" (Teacher L, School C) is what drives them; they feel responsible. Every success story of a pupil who has managed to graduate from school, even though this was not expected at first, makes the success of this action strategy visible. Teachers with this action orientation say to themselves: "You can make a difference" (Teacher L, School C). The visible effects of their action strengthen their self-esteem (Hattie, 2010). The flip side lies in the fact that the teachers also see themselves as responsible for the failures of pupils, and this commitment can weigh heavily on them.

4.2. Consequences: Creating Equality or Inequality?

Despite their different points of view, all teachers in my sample would say they aim to create social equality of opportunity with their action orientations. However, it is not obvious but rather more subtle that the first two orientations have the effect of perpetuating social inequalities. The orientations that prioritize individualized achievement (I) and the engagement of third parties (II) were only found among the teachers of the two East German schools, especially among the teachers at School A. In what could be seen as a continuation of the education system of the GDR, they teach pupils as if they were a homogeneous group. As one teacher noted: "Today, you have a lot of individualists; we used to be more of a mass" (Teacher D, School A). The consequence is that differences in learning backgrounds are

ignored and disadvantaged pupils are put at a further disadvantage. This is one factor that contributes to schools being far from socially neutral settings that provide equal opportunities for all (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1998). Other studies have indicated that these strategies of individualizing performance and engaging third parties are widespread in Germany (Hollstein, 2008; Lange-Vester, 2012; Streckeisen et al., 2007; von Below et al., 2013) as well as in other countries (Lareau, 2011).

Research has not distinguished the other two action orientations—namely, putting pupils in context (III) and engaging in socially informed supportive action (IV)—in German-speaking countries so far. The first of these indeed offers a potential means of reducing inequalities. By relating their actions to the establishment of a working alliance with parents and pupils, as is the case in School B and especially School C, teachers with this orientation act in a socially sensitive manner. This includes empowering pupils who are socially distant through linguistic interaction routines, setting expectations appropriate to the situation, and taking socio-cultural differences into account. This expands the pedagogical scope of action to include the necessity of familiarizing pupils (and parents) with school expectations. There are seven teachers—including a few from the reform-oriented school in East Germany (School B), but mostly those from the reform-pedagogical comprehensive school in Lower Saxony (School C)—who subscribe to this action orientation. Paying closer attention to parents and pupils is anchored in the reform-pedagogical concept that School C promotes through its internal culture.

It is therefore not surprising that there are only four teachers in this sample who integrate socially informed supportive action into their pedagogical mission, and they are found only in School C. On the basis of their experiences and knowledge of the pupils' personal situations, these teachers develop pedagogical strategies to provide socially sensitive support. They acquire a social relationality through close, emotionally influenced encounters with individuals from diverse backgrounds. As a consequence, the teachers relate the pupils' achievements and their behavior with their personal lives and extracurricular environments. This brings the diagnostic competence, social wisdom, and experience of teachers to the fore, and the provision of emotional and social support transforms the teacher's role into that of a guide who accompanies the development of students on a case-by-case basis (Pantić, 2017). In Germany, this building and cultivation of personal relationships results in a shift in teachers' self-conception and possibly requires conceptual or social support of its own.

To summarize, then: Teachers in East Germany seem more likely to assume that everyone is able to perform equally and has parents to support them. Supportive teachers who explore the students' learning backgrounds are predominantly found at one institution, School C in Lower Saxony. But these explanations are superficial and ignore the divergent or shared spaces

of experience and organizational embeddedness. It is rather the school as an organization that seems to have the most significant influence on teachers. Furthermore, the teachers from School C would seem to be special cases, because most of them intentionally applied to teach there, which is unusual for German teachers. Even if this study is exploratory and highly selective, it is possible to identify conditions that might be helpful in empowering teachers to address social inequalities.

5. Socio-Cultural Heritage: The Arrangement of Education in the GDR and the Post-Reunification Transformation

The finding that only the East German teachers prioritize the assessment of individualized performance (action orientations I and II) needs to be explained. To this end, I will focus on the most central aspect to teachers' orientation (Behrmann, in press), that is, the unintended side effects of the political transformation of the all-day school system with the abolition of working with parents and the all-day involvement of teachers.

When it comes to the teachers' day-to-day experience, these shifts go along with fundamental changes in dealing with parents and pupils. More than one teacher expresses the sentiment that they "were... damaged by the reunification, so everything that had to do with parents was supposed to be left out of the school. They really said we weren't allowed" (Teacher B, School A). Prior to reunification, teachers in the GDR were accustomed to being in close contact with parents, which may even have been a politically ideologically motivated act. The GDR system offered them a concrete opportunity to align their everyday work with the ideal of equal opportunity in that East German teachers were able to provide supplemental care services after the formal end of the school day. In this way they disentangled themselves from their role as knowledge giver, focusing on pupils' individualized performance in the morning and becoming a supportive mentor in the form of a life and learning companion in the afternoon. Owing to its ideological nature, this extracurricular sphere of activity vanished after 1990. German reunification threw the former East German teachers back into the role of knowledge givers and transferred the responsibility for afternoon care to other (extracurricular) institutions.

It could therefore be said that unified Germany, unlike the GDR, has not provided a political mandate to create equal opportunities that has translated into these teachers' everyday actions. As a result of these experiences, the East German teachers in my sample conceive of inequalities as a concern of school policies and systems, not as a responsibility among their daily practices. In this regard, we are talking about a legacy educational model of the GDR that has not been carried forward. The East German teachers in turn tend to perceive the emerging educational inequalities as a failure of the educational policy of a united Germany. They take

issue with the abolition after 1990 of the *Einheitsschule*, which taught all children together from their first to their tenth year of schooling. After the reunification the process of early selection was introduced after the fourth grade and the division of secondary education into multiple performance-based paths. All of this, in their opinion, worked against the creation of social justice that had previously been made possible under the GDR. As one teacher concludes: “When social democracy says we want equal opportunities for all, that is simply a lie, it cannot work like that” (Teacher B, School A).

Therefore, it may be that teachers were more accustomed to addressing students’ social backgrounds during the GDR era, but the transformation of the school system changed their role and diminished their opportunities to support schoolchildren in such a way that they now see less potential to address social differences.

6. Enabling the Conditions that Create Equality: Equality as a School Norm and the Importance of Support

In addition to this unique aspect of the reunification experience and the effects of the transformation of the education system on teachers’ orientations, this study is able to identify broader factors in how teachers might be enabled to contribute to eliminating inequalities and shrinking divides. While analyzing the interviews, it became apparent that the teachers were not sufficiently sensitized to the significance of social disadvantage and privilege either during their academic studies or when they entered the profession; rather, school norms and biographical experiences informed their perspectives.

6.1. School Policies and Norms: A Regime of Equality

As has already been stated, the notion of creating equality goes hand in hand with a pedagogical approach that takes the family lives of the pupils into account. This relationship-building results in a shift in German teachers’ understanding of their profession. Traditionally, maintaining social distance to their students, focusing on knowledge, and assessing performance by means of assigning numerical grades have characterized their work (Gudjons, 2006). If their school’s policy were to prioritize addressing social inequality and offering support to disadvantaged students, then this is likely to become the task of its staff, as was seen partially at School B and especially at School C. Two points of the school’s organizational framework deserve emphasis for activating teachers’ agency in addressing social equality: the intensification of *working with parents* and a *collegial discourse*.

Not merely paying more attention to students’ parents but also experiencing the conditions in the students’ homes can make teachers aware of the various efforts that pupils make to meet school expectations. Schools can help initiate a working alliance between parents and teachers, for example, encouraging teachers to visit fam-

ily homes can create a greater awareness of the divergence of lifestyles. Teachers who are more familiar with different parents and homes are better able to socially relate to the student’s learning situation and the ways in which it might deviate from their assumptions (see also Lyons et al., 2016; Naraian & Schlessinger, 2018; Pantić, 2017).

Strategies of socially sensitive action are only discursively exchanged at School C. In my observations of and participation in daily school life, I noticed that teachers, school heads, and other employees discussed how they can support a pupil’s interest in learning. In this event teachers’ knowledge about a student’s social background would become explicit knowledge that could inform pedagogical practice. Social inequality is thus no longer a taboo subject, which opens the possibility for socially informed supportive action.

Only School C has a conceptual framework that coordinates the teachers’ actions to create equality. And apparently teachers’ addressing social differences as part of their pedagogical routine—as the East German case highlights—requires organizational or conceptual justification. In School C this strong interlinkage exists between teachers’ orientations and school policies and norms. But it should be noted that School C is part of a rare counter-political sphere.

School B does show some tendencies towards the readjustment of parental involvement and the establishment of a pedagogical discourse along these lines, but they are not as sustainable. In School A, on the other hand, parents are only contacted when there are visible problems (per orientation II). The school has no intention of developing a closer personal relationship between its parents and teachers.

This study therefore indicates that there is a need for some form of mandate or legitimization that would empower teachers to adopt a more active orientation toward addressing social differences in the student body. One way that this could be achieved is by mandating that teachers be involved in all-day schooling either by way of higher-level educational policy reform or via school-level policies and norms. The interviews indicate that, in response to certain requirements, teachers seem to adapt their pedagogical practices in a collegial environment more quickly and more dramatically than one might assume (Terhart, 2013).

6.2. Biography and Subjective Experiences: Received Support

The teachers’ biographical narratives make it clear that their ways of dealing with social diversity or socially divergent values as well as their forms of communication, aspirations, and resources are guided by subjective experiences:

Because of my own biography, I was also lucky that I had this math teacher at the *Aufbaugymnasium*

[another route to the baccalaureate]. He always knew that I had to take the bus for an hour-and-a-half every morning to get to this school and that just did me good; I know how much good it does, doesn't it? (Teacher L, School C)

This teacher is among those four teachers who are sensitive to social differences (orientation III) and are themselves from families of lower social backgrounds. It might seem surprising that upwardly mobile people would act in a socially sensitive manner, as prior research has found that status demarcation is more likely to take place among these status groups (Hollstein, 2008; Weckwerth, 2014) whereby one's own performance is recognized as a determinant of success and reproduced as a norm. My reconstructive analysis points instead to a central effect of their specific experience. In distancing themselves from their original milieu and coping with social ruptures, these upwardly mobile individuals found support to be a significant contributor to their success. Their success stories are thus no longer based on individual achievements but rather become stories of the social and emotional support they experienced. This narrative of support likewise breaks with the thesis of middle-class membership along a key biographical dimension (Lange-Vester, 2015). This is underscored by the finding that no East German teacher in this study sample attributed any significance to the idea of student support. If one considers that upwardly mobile East Germans often benefitted from a political "anti-privilege" counterculture (Miethe, 2007), it is clear why they attribute their success solely to their own performance and tend to focus on pupils' individualized performance.

One way to increase teachers' capacity for appreciating and accounting for social differences might lie in increasing their awareness of the importance of parental support, which is still taken for granted by most actors in the German school system.

7. Conclusion

By drawing on a purposive sample of 20 teachers from three comprehensive schools in East and West Germany, this study identifies four different orientations toward creating (in)equality through teachers' activities. Even if comprehensive schools in Germany offer a valid alternative to the inequitable categorization and sorting of schoolchildren, only a few teachers' action orientations overtly aim to create equality. The first two action orientations, which involve focusing on individualized performance and engaging parents' support, have already been explored in other studies (Hollstein, 2008; Lange-Vester et al., 2019; Streckeisen et al., 2007) and seem to be the major ones. The latter two types demonstrate social sensitivity in that they relate the social conditions under which students attend school to their performance, effort, and development. One could therefore state that teachers have the potential to be key

players in transforming educational inequalities (van der Heijden et al., 2015). Furthermore, my study has identified fundamental conditions that make it possible to expand or shift the teachers' roles so that individualized support becomes one of their tasks.

First, the *importance of support* is particularly emphasized by teachers from socially disadvantaged backgrounds who themselves benefited from support (Sleeter, 2001). The middle-class thesis has largely prevailed, and even if precise data—both national and international—are lacking (Heinz & Keane, 2018), one can assume that teachers with a lower social background are rare (Kampa et al., 2011; Kühne, 2006). However, it is now necessary to examine whether the knowledge on the significance of support can be passed on to other actors who do not have the same benefit of direct biographical experience.

Second, socially sensitive teachers are most likely to be found in schools that focus on equal opportunities normatively and practically (see also Levin, 2008). *School policy* can make equal opportunities a priority—for example, by organizing binding work with parents and initiating collegial discourses about social inequality. Policies that celebrate or publicize different schools' approaches to addressing social differences could open up a larger discourse about teachers' strategies and raise broader awareness about this responsibility.

A new perspective, one that has yet to receive proper attention, is opened up by the contrast of East and West Germany. The central position of teachers in the GDR enabled teachers to reconcile tasks: teaching in the morning and providing support in the afternoon. In Germany, *all-day schooling* has been in place since 2003, but the majority of the schools adopt a model that follows the classical idea of half-day schooling. Recent political efforts to establish some form of all-day schooling also involve a division of responsibility between teaching (by teachers) and daycare (by other professions) that has not been examined in terms of its role in (re)producing social inequalities. As the results of my study indicate, all-day contact with students could make teachers more attuned to social differences and the tacit requirement of support that is vital to success in the school system.

This explorative study shows that, if schools are to take equal opportunity seriously and address the mechanisms of reproducing social inequality, we need to consider in this discussion how teachers are involved in all-day schooling and extracurricular activities and what effect these arrangements might have on the perpetuation or redress of social inequality. Further research is required to shed brighter light on the different varieties of all-day schooling. This is because teachers' sense of agency in addressing social differences may depend on whether schooling takes place in the form of lessons, as in France; or in a mix of lessons and other activities, as in Finland; or a separation of half-day lessons by teachers and afternoon activities supervised by other parties,

as in Germany. For the sake of our increasingly pluralistic European society, it is important to pursue these areas of research in order to gain a better understanding of teachers' agency in addressing social differences among the student body.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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